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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: DIVERGENT GON VIEWS ON LIBERIA

REF: STATE 102686

CLASSIFIED BY CHARGE ANDREWS. REASON 1.5 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary: Recent discussions with two senior GON officials reveal GON ambivalence on Liberia. Vacillating between two divergent philosophical approaches, Nigeria's position on Liberia is fluid and not fixed to any coherent strategy. One contending belief, championed by Special Advisor on Conflict Resolution Uwechue and based on a vague pan-African romanticism, is that the Liberian conflict can be extinguished and Charles Taylor can be converted through discussion and neutral mediation. The other perspective, advanced by Presidential Special Advisor Ad'obe Obe, is tougher and edgier. This approach also starts with discussions but here Nigeria assumes the role of interested power not selfless mediator. If a party refuses Abuja's counsel, Nigeria sees a rejection of its sub-regional primacy and will draw distance between itself and that party. Because President Taylor recently rebuffed Obasanjo's offer to visit Abuja, the Obe viewpoint is currently ascendant. Because of Taylor's contumacy, Nigeria is willing, for the time being, to let the Liberian President continue to feel the press of the LURD at his back. End Summary.

HAVE CONFLICT, WILL TALK

12. (C) During a conversation in late May with PolCouns, Special Presidential Advisor for Conflict Resolution, Ambassador Ralph Uwechue, extolled continued dialogue and mediation to resolve the Liberian crisis. Uwechue contended progress would not have visited Sierra Leone but for the GON policy of dialogue with Taylor. Everyone knew the path to peace in Sierra Leone went through Monrovia because of Taylor's mentoring of the RUF. Nigeria could have ostracized Taylor and sought a military solution against the RUF. This, Uwechue expostulated, would have led to prolonged but inclusive fighting -- a perennial military stalemate. Uwechue mentioned that constant entreaties and overtures by Obasanjo asking Taylor to urge the RUF to cooperate in the peace process transformed the Liberian leader from chaperone of RUF mayhem to encouraging the group to down their weapons and take to the electoral hustings.

13. (C) Although noting the contributions of Britain's muscular presence in Sierra Leone, UNAMSIL and the UN sanctions to the peace process, Uwechue remained loyal to his credo that dialogue was the most critical factor in the peace process. Now, he saw the need to employ the same tool to work with Taylor in his own front yard. Acknowledging the task in Liberia would be more difficult because the stakes for Taylor were higher, Uwechue advocated that Nigeria continue to talk to Taylor. Nigeria recognized the importance of dialogue in resolving African conflicts, including Liberia, he declared. Breaking the line of communication was anathema. Although this method seemed circuitous and time-consuming, it simply was not enough to develop a plan for peace; to be succeed, one must develop a plan for how to make Taylor believe that he has developed the plan for peace. The more Taylor feels that other countries are not interested in toppling him and think he is capable of good, the more reasonable he will be. While Taylor's book of misdeeds is voluminous, he is neither a devil nor are many of the rest of us saints, Uwechue posited.

14. (C) Uwechue urged the USG to exploit Taylor's current predicament diplomatically. LURD success has rendered him off-balance; in his weakened political state, Taylor will be more amenable to compromise, Uwechue offered. However, if the international community remains relatively mute in the face of an apparently tumescent LURD, he will suspect international support for the insurgents. Taylor's paranoia would increase, bringing more fighting and suppression of domestic dissent in its wake.

15. (C) Uwechue thought we should implement a policy of what could be termed "positive containment." Under this stratagem, we would inform Taylor that his ouster is not our objective but he must cease encroachments into neighboring real estate. If extra-territorial ambitions continued to rule him, we would actively oppose these designs; as long as he desisted from cross-border misconduct, Taylor could expect our indifference, at the very least, even in the face of some degree of continued misrule at home. Moreover, willingness for political and economic openness at home could turn that benign indifference -- matching each constructive, reform-oriented step on his part by one on ours -- into a more positive engagement. Part of that positive engagement would include pressing Guinea to be a much less gracious host to the LURD.

16. (C) In the final analysis, Uwechue claimed, Liberia was not amenable to a military solution. The prospect of chronic stalemate between the LURD and the GOL was depressing. The political pedigree of the LURD leadership was equally frightening; that group promised to govern no better than Taylor, if they managed to oust him.

PAX NIGERIANA, TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT

17. (C) Both in tenor and substance, Presidential Advisor Obe's view of Liberia differed significantly from Uwechue's. Obe recalled President Obasanjo trying to consult with and counsel Taylor; yet Monrovia remained deaf to Abuja's voice. Now, President Obasanjo has little patience or sympathy for Taylor, Obe contended.

18. (C) Obe saw almost no possibility for peaceful resolution in Liberia due to Taylor's intransigent meanness. Embedded in Taylor's pathology is an innate inability to follow reason when it does not immediately sate of his appetite for power. When confronted between what is rational and what he desires, Taylor will choose the latter. Talk alone cannot sway him. The offer of some political carrots is unlikely to hold influence because Taylor wants to own the entire farm. The only thing that attracts Taylor's undivided attention is a demonstration of force, Obe maintained. Obe doubted that Obasanjo would attempt to reach out to Taylor any time soon. If he does not want Nigeria's involvement in resolving this crisis, he will not get it. Taylor has made this mess for himself, now let him flail in it, Obe scoffed.

COMMENT

19. (C) In a certain sense, the views on Liberia expressed by Uwechue and Obe reveal as much about their personalities as their input into GON policy. Uwechue is by nature ebullient and an optimist. There are few people he dislikes; he would talk to a boulder if told there was a slight chance it might budge. The acerbic Obe has a much more cynical worldview, and not everyone is his friend. Indeed, others at State House sometimes call him the "Most Obnoxious Nigerian" (given the number of other formidable contestants, this is a truly stinging characterization with which we do not really agree). Because of his avowed pan-Africanism, Uwechue's stance on regional conflict resolution has a precatory quality. Promotion of the pan-Africanist ideal requires Nigeria to remain involved in conflict resolution and continue to reach out even when rebuffed. Not so with Obe. Unlike Uwechue, he is not a staunch pan-Africanist, and there is little space for romanticism in his creed. He does not easily countenance insolence from Nigeria's lesser

neighbors. If another country crosses Nigeria, he is prone write off that country.

¶10. (C) Both men profess to know and reflect Obasanjo's GON views on Liberia, and, paradoxically, we believe both are correct. Obasanjo operates as his own foreign minister, particularly on Liberia. Obasanjo's personality -- and his approach to Liberia -- have elements of Uwechue's congeniality and Obe's jagged edges. Angered by Taylor's stubbornness and rejection of the invitation to visit Abuja (the second rejection this year), Obasanjo currently is probably closer to Obe's position. However, that might not last long. Events in Liberia, further discussions with other regional leaders, or something extraneous could cause Obasanjo's mood to swing back toward engagement.

¶11. (C) Affecting all of this are the time constraints imposed by the President's demanding schedule. Obasanjo is has a busy travel itinerary for the remainder of June and much of July. This could limit the attention he gives Liberia during the next several weeks. Moreover, as Nigeria's electoral season steadily moves toward full swing, the desire and opportunities to be fully engaged on Liberia will diminish for Obasanjo, particularly with the need to shore-up his re-nomination bid before the PDP national convention slated for October.

ANDREWS